

Dahomey

Past & Present in the Old Slave Kingdom

By Frank R. Cana

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A GENERATION ago Dahomey was an independent state with an hereditary monarchy whose power was limited only by that of fetishism ; it was notorious alike for its human sacrifices, its army of Amazons, and its incessant raids on its neighbours. French rule has, however, brought great changes ; no longer are human sacrifices offered, neither are the skulls of fallen enemies used as drinking cups, or piled in pyramids as monuments of victory ; the she-soldiery have been disbanded : the kingdom, built up by two centuries of conquest, has dissolved into its component parts.

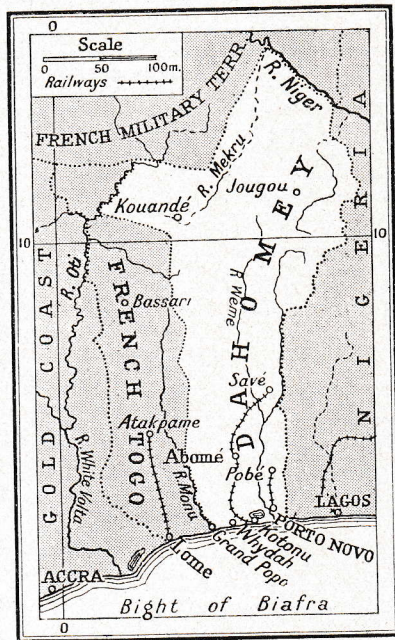
But the Dahomian remains a type of those West African tribes who, cut off from contact with other parts of the continent, proved themselves capable of building up strong and elaborately organized states possessing a highly remarkable degree of civilization. Separated from the Sudan by a broad belt of virgin forest, they owed nothing, or next to nothing, to the infiltration of the higher types of African humanity. They owed, indeed, a good deal to the white man who came to the Guinea coast for ivory, gold, spices, and — principally — slaves. But their genius for government and their elaborate ceremonial were innate. No Oriental or European court ever had a more elaborate etiquette for state functions than had these

West Coast negroes, whose system was seen at its height alike in Ashanti, Dahomey, and Benin. Each of these states had its special features, and Dahomey was alone in maintaining a standing army and in making women professional soldiers.

The aspect of Dahomey is monotonous. The coast line is formed by a low, level, narrow strip of sand, against which the great breakers of the Atlantic roll continually. There are no harbours, and landing through the surf is still the general custom, though at Kotonu the French have built a pier where ships can unload. Behind the strip of coast lies a network of lagoons and swamps, mangrove-lined and forbidding. Beyond is the bush, giving place to forest proper, oil-palms and bamboos being conspicuous. The orange and citron trees, very numerous in some localities, were

introduced by the Portuguese. To-day there is little big game in the forest, but when first known elephants were plentiful, as was also the lion.

The forest, too, is much thinner than it used to be. In the clearings the natives cultivate, often in large quantities, maize, millet, manioc, yams, and beans, and when it is realized that nearly all these things are not African but, like the oranges, were introduced by the early Portuguese, it will be admitted that the old slavers did not do evil only. The three essentially



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native trade products of the country were men, ivory, and palm-oil. The trade in ivory went first, slave dealing lingered on almost to the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the trade in palm-oil, at first insignificant, is to-day the basis of the country's prosperity.

North of the primeval forest, across the once dreaded Lama swamp—now traversed by a railway—the ground rises gradually to a more open plateau, some 800 ft. high, and here stands Abomey, the old capital of Dahomey, the scene of the annual "customs," when scores of victims were sacrificed to the ancestral spirits, and of the still more dreadful "grand customs," celebrated on the king's accession, when the victims sometimes numbered thousands.

The kingdom of Dahomey, at its greatest extent, covered about 10,000

square miles; it was, that is, about as large as Yorkshire, Durham, and Northumberland combined, and from the sea it stretched about 125 miles inland. It is inhabited by numerous tribes, each with a different though often allied language.

The dominant race is the Fong, a tribe known also as Fons, Jejs or Jefe, whose proper name is Ffon. Somewhat above the average height, well-formed, square-faced, with deep-set eyes and flattish rather than flat noses, and low foreheads, their skin is not really black, but varies in colour from a dark chestnut to deep purple, with sometimes a yellowish tinge.

The Fong are inordinately proud—as becomes a conquering race—reserved, polite to strangers, and do not now deserve the reputation they held at the time of the French conquest of being liars above the ordinary, slothful and



EUROPEAN FASHIONS FOR MEN IN A WEST AFRICAN TOWN

Situated on the coast near the frontier of what is now French Togoland, and on a lagoon whereon small steamers can ply, Grand Popo is an important trading town of Dahomey. The Mina, the natives who occupy the district, are wonderfully skilful surfmen. Despite the distressing climatic conditions a good many Europeans of mixed nationality are found in the town

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treacherous. They are certainly keen traders, and the ruling class is of much more than average intelligence. Their kings were masterful men, as they had need to be if they would keep their thrones. They surrounded themselves with women—numbering their wives by hundreds—and the Amazon army grew out of a feminine lifeguard established by the early monarchs.

Trade Leads the Van of Empire

The story of Dahomey cannot be separated from that of the European traders who frequented the coast and made the lagoon port of Whydah their headquarters. The Portuguese were the first to come, and they have not quite gone. Indeed, to-day, though Whydah and the adjoining regions have been annexed by France, the fort of São João Baptista d'Ajuda (St. John Baptist of Whydah) is still claimed by Portugal as part of the province formed by the famous coco-producing islands of San Thomé and Príncipe in the Gulf of Guinea. An officer and twenty men guard the Lusitanian flag at the Baptist fort, while high-sounding Portuguese names are borne by natives all along the coast.

After the Portuguese came the French, the British, the Dutch, and other adventurers. The oldest of the modern forts at Whydah is that built by the French in 1671; English, Portuguese, and Brazilian forts were also built, and when Sir Richard Burton was at Whydah in 1864 he recorded the shameful fact that the English fort was under the protection of two fetish charms.

Ivory, White and Black

From their first coming to the coast the white merchants in black flesh maintained agents at the courts of the native potentates, chief of whom in the seventeenth century were the kings of Hwedah (Whydah) who lived at Savé, some miles inland, and the kings of Allada, farther inland. The kings of Whydah, though they ruled over less than 50 square miles of territory, were immensely wealthy, deriving their riches from the dues levied on the export of

slaves and ivory. In the middle of the seventeenth century 20,000 slaves were shipped yearly.

The prosperity of Whydah in the next century is illustrated by the truly royal dash (present) of half a hundredweight of gold dust, which the king gave to the English captain, Sir Challoner Ogle, for ridding the Guinea Coast of the notorious pirate Bartholomew Roberts. Roberts had sadly interfered with the monopoly of the slave trade which England then possessed with Spanish America, to the great detriment of the Whydahs. This was in 1772; five years later Whydah was conquered by Agaja Dosu, king of Dahomey, who had already conquered the neighbouring kingdom of Allada. The Whydahs had trusted to their gods for salvation. To guard a ford, where a few hundred men could have withstood a host, they placed nothing but their great fetish Danh, a carved stone snake. But the Dahomian general cared nothing for Danh—the fetish of his king was a panther—Savé was captured, and 4,000 of its people sacrificed to Agaja's gods and ancestors.

An African Tamerlane

This Agaja was the fourth of his line. The founder of the dynasty was a prince of Allada named Dako, who had gone north and established himself near Kana, the residence of the then chieftain of the Fong. Dako killed this chieftain and usurped his kingdom, which was enlarged in subsequent reigns. Agaja was a conqueror by profession, a Tamerlane in miniature. It is said of him that he sought territory and not consolidation, skulls not subjects, but in seeking an outlet to the sea he had his eye on the main chance—to draw to himself all the benefit which the kings of Whydah had derived from their dealings with the white slave-traders. And in token of his success he emblazoned on his flag a two-masted ship. From this time, too, the kings of Dahomey imported large quantities of guns, cannon and ammunition.

When the Dahomians became masters of Whydah they became also virtual overlords of the white traders on the coast. The kings insisted on the presence



HIGH PRIEST OF DARKNESS WHOSE POWER IS WANING

Slowly pacing with his acolytes down the woodland ways, this dignified high priest of fetishism still finds many to do him reverence, for the Dahomians proper are mostly fetich worshippers. But civilization is clearing the mental vision of his people even as it is letting light into their forests. and has shorn him of much of his spiritual power

Photo, Govt. French West Africa

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of white notables at Abomey for the annual "customs," and these visitors were compelled to witness the human sacrifices with which the festival ended. But if the kings exacted respect, they were prepared to show respect for the white man.

The viceroy of Whydah, before going upon and on returning from a journey, paid official visits to the European forts, and had to offer prayers to the white man's god in the chapel of the Portuguese fort, first removing his sword and fetish charms. And the black priests who used to officiate sprinkled the heathen with holy water. As a further mark of their patronage of Christianity, every year on St. John's Day the king sent a pot of palm-oil and a bottle of rum to the

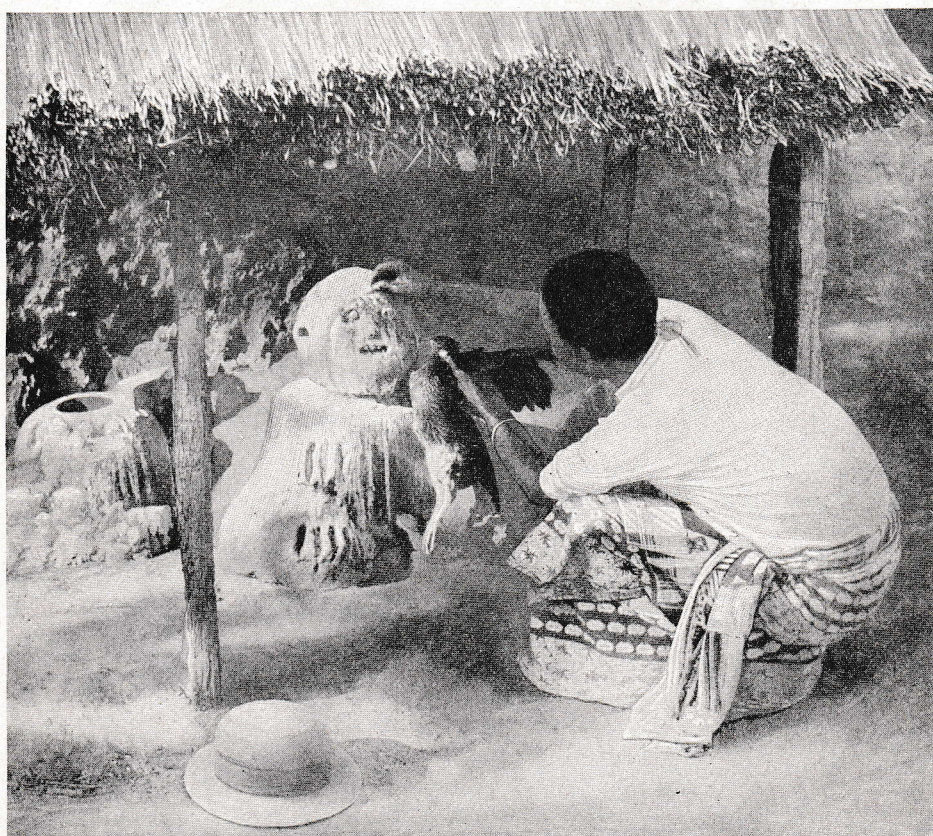
guardians of the Portuguese chapel. The Dahomians were very religious, and their human sacrifices were not evidences of wanton cruelty, but resulted from a mixture of piety and pride—of pride as to the numbers slain, of piety, inasmuch as the spirits of the victims were sent to be attendants on dead monarchs or other ancestors. Such sacrifices were distinct from those offered to the gods. The accounts of European witnesses of the annual "customs" vary, as did the "customs" themselves during the 160 years they were under observation. But they always included the public slaughter of prisoners of war and criminals in the market-place. Some of the victims were tied to posts, others were exhibited in baskets on a platform. On the fateful



PEACEFUL VILLAGE LIFE UNDER UMBRAGEOUS TREES

Under French rule quiet contentment pervades the scattered villages of Upper Dahomey. Here, in Dassazoumbé, the girls may fetch water, and children may play on the boulders outside their beehive homes without fear of molestation by slave-raiders or warlike neighbours. Their customs are little interfered with, and the natives can cultivate their crops for their own use, and acquire comparative wealth by extracting palm-oil for the market

Photo. Govt. French West Africa



ART SERVES RELIGION: DAHOMIAN SCULPTOR CARVING A FETISH

Fetichism is not idolatry, but a belief that the services of a spirit may be appropriated by possessing its material embodiment, and a fetish thus is a useful spirit in its proper shrine. This devout Dahomian is making a clay image for presentation to his fetish priest, using the beak of a slain fowl to carve the features in the plastic material

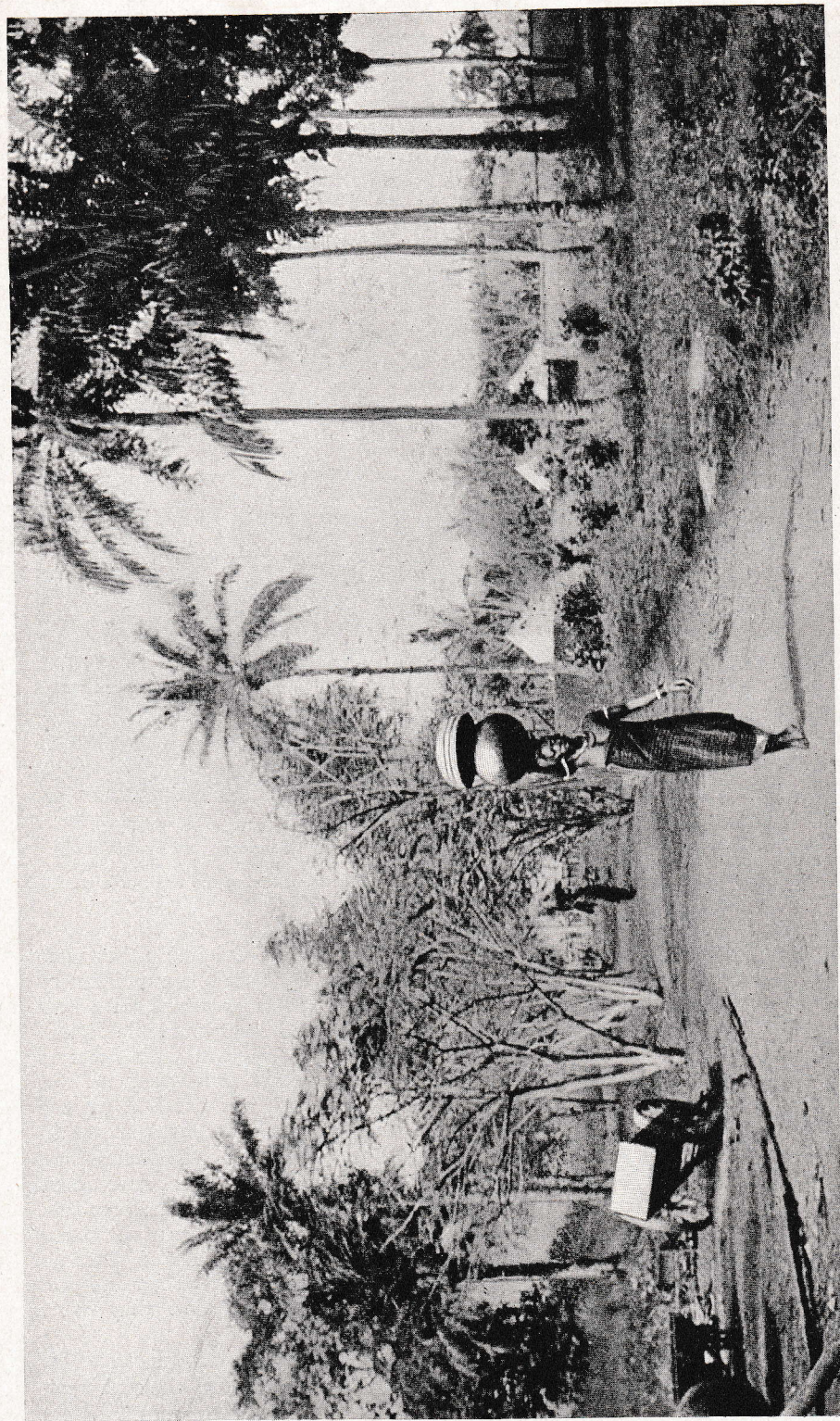
Photo, J. R. Birtwistle

day the king came out in state and explained to the people that the victims were being sent to wait upon his ancestors in the spirit world. The condemned men were then slain, in some cases the king himself being the executioner. While most of the victims were decapitated, those on the platform were hurled, bound, into the midst of the crowd, by whom they were butchered. Animals were sacrificed at the same time. The king, wrote one eye-witness, bathed his feet in the blood of the slain, while their heads were placed in neat rows at the entrance to the palace.

Visitors to Abomey witnessed not only the "customs," but the army manoeuvres. They bear testimony to the high training, martial bearing, and powers of endurance of the Amazon corps, which numbered between 2,000

and 3,000 women. Originally they were divided into light and heavy infantry battalions, the former armed with bow and spear and a formidable knife. Later all were provided with firearms and became good markswomen. In valour they were not excelled by the men warriors, as indeed was shown in their last campaign, when they more than once charged right up to the French lines, several falling in hand-to-hand combats. At parades a usual manoeuvre was a charge through triple lines of piled up thorns, a severe test, as their uniform gave little protection and they went barefoot.

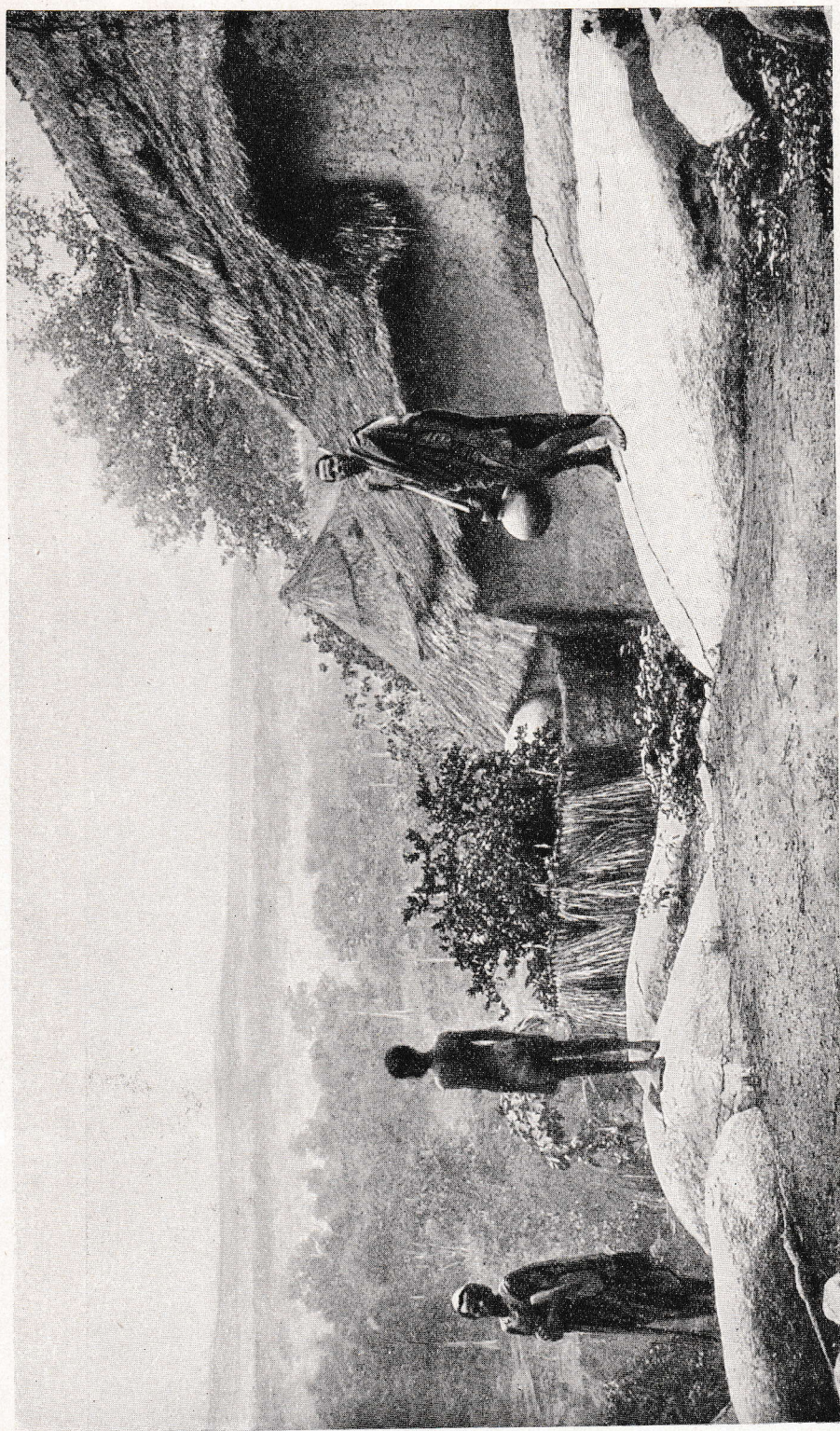
As the king sacrificed regularly to his ancestors, just as regularly he sent forth his warriors, both for conquest and for procuring slaves, for no Dahomian could be sold. The captives, such as were not



NATURAL BEAUTY AND PHYSICAL GRACE AT ZAGNANADO: ON DAHOMEY'S GREAT NORTH ROAD

Lithe and erect, with her heavy water-pot balanced on her head, this Dahomian girl might almost be taken for a sculptured figure from a fountain for the refreshment of travellers on the great road that runs northward from Porto Novo through Zagnanado to Savé. Thence, as the metalled East Road, it extends to Mallanville on the Niger. These fine roads are under Government control and are maintained by the use of forced labour

Photo, Govt. French West Africa



"WHERE EVERY PROSPECT PLEASES": DASSAZOUMBÉ VILLAGERS ON THEIR WOODED HEIGHT

Savanna, with dry forest and bush, characterises the central zone of Dahomey where the Savalu district is situated, one of the few thickly populated areas north of Abomey. Much of it is occupied by the Nagos, a race decidedly inferior to the Fongé, at whose mercy they have always been, owing to their lack of centralised organization. Commanding a perfectly magnificent panorama, this village has an air of comfort, but the natives' civilization is comparatively low

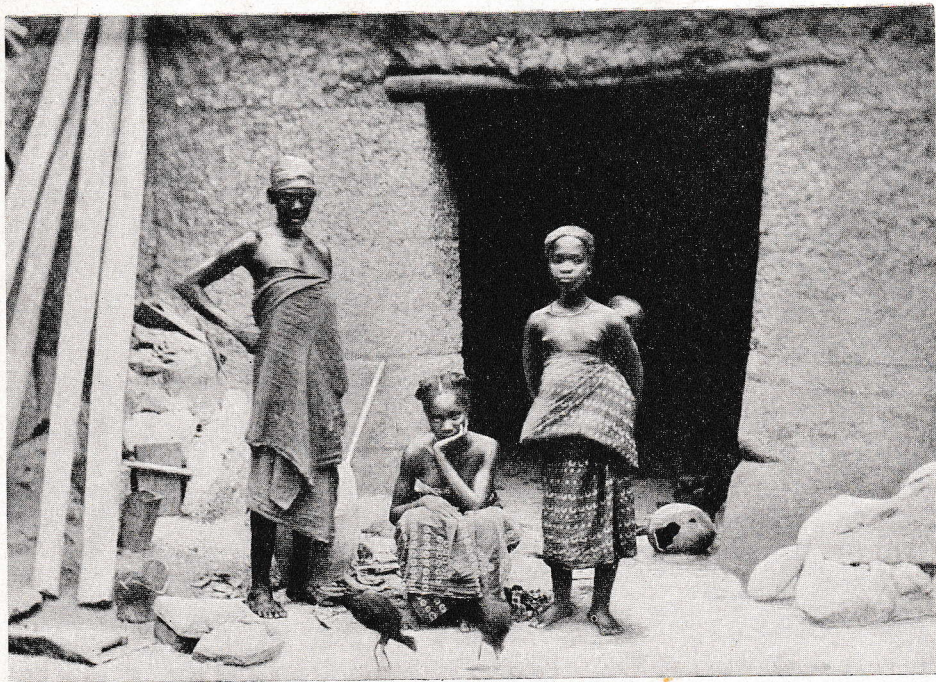
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PAGEENTRY OF TRIBAL LIFE: DAHOMIANS DANCING THE TAM-TAM AT ATHIÉMÉ

Action dances of primitive peoples provide a fascinating study for the ethnologist. Dances representing fights are practised universally where warfare is a main occupation of the men, and are partly of the nature of military exercise. The bravery dance of the Dahomians is an example. In another action dance of Dahomey the warriors, hunters, minstrels, carpenters, and blacksmiths take part, with their weapons, instruments, and tools of their trade

Photo, Govt. French West Africa



YOUTHFUL DAHOMIANS WHO ARE HAPPY UNDER FRENCH RULE

They are natives of Abomey, the ancient capital of Dahomey, and once a great stronghold in the scrubland, mud-walled and protected by a deep fosse filled with a growth of prickly acacia. Burned by King Behazin on his defeat and flight, the town has been rebuilt by the French, greatly to the material benefit of its native inhabitants

given to the princes, ministers of state, and caboceers (governors), cultivated the royal farms. From these slave farms the requirements of the white dealers were met. When the public conscience of Europe awoke to the iniquity of the slave trade the revenues of the kings of Dahomey suffered, but those monarchs showed no signs of adapting themselves to changed conditions. Gezo, a famous warrior-king who reorganized and increased his women soldiery and died in 1858, was succeeded by Gléglé, who (without knowing it) was instrumental in bringing Nigeria under British rule. It was to counter Gléglé's slave-dealing that the British in 1861 annexed Lagos. A little later the French established their first protectorate over Porto Novo, a little coast kingdom which Dahomey had not absorbed, and they obtained from Gléglé in 1878 the grant of Kotonu, with the right to collect customs.

It was in 1889, during the scramble for Africa, that the British acknowledged French claims to the country; in the same year Gléglé died, and was succeeded

by his son Behazin, or Behanzin. War between the French and Behazin followed, in which the Amazons played their part "manfully." Peace was patched up, but was broken by Dahomian raids on Porto Novo. Then came the campaign of General Dodds (1892-94), which ended in the complete conquest of Dahomey. Behazin died in 1906, an exile in Algeria.

The French have not violently interfered with native life; chiefs, if not kings, still exercise authority. Many of the old war lords of Behazin became officials.

Even the annual "customs" continue at Abomey, though without human sacrifice. In place of the king the head of the youngest branch of the royal family officiates, and the ceremonies last four days. But the palace or palaces of Abomey—each monarch built himself a new abode, adjoining that of his predecessor—are in decay. The kposi, or spouses of the panther, and the ahosi, the ordinary wives of the king, are dispersed, the princes are scattered, the slaves freed; only a few faithful women



INDUSTRY FETTERED BY IGNORANCE: NATIVES MAKING PALM-OIL

Palm-oil is the principal industry of Dahomey, the oil palm growing wild throughout the country, and also being cultivated largely. The natives crack the nuts by hand to obtain the kernels—a slow process only gradually being replaced by mechanical crackers—and their primitive method of extracting the oil prevents them getting more than about 70 per cent. of the possible yield

remain to tend the royal tombs, for each monarch (except Behazin) is buried in the house in which he lived and died.

These palaces were rectangular buildings of unbaked earth, and were frequently adorned with bas-reliefs of animals. Dahomian art was crude, showing little of the skill of the Benin brasses; such as it was, it was mostly derived from contact with Europeans. Imitative the Dahomians certainly were; their thrones were exaggerated copies of the Ashanti stools, and, as with the Ashanti, the flat-topped, large umbrella was a symbol of royal authority. Even more sacred was the baton, the bearing of which was the mark of ambassadorial powers; when an official solemnly produced his baton, the people would prostrate themselves and pour dust on their heads, as if in the presence of the sovereign. Batons took the place of a visiting card, a signature, a passport.

The usual Dahomian dress was a long robe of cotton or silk thrown over the shoulder and wound round the body, but other garments were worn. The Amazons, for instance, were dressed in a

short Zouave-like vest, knickerbockers, and short skirt. To-day there is a tendency to adopt European clothes. This is most noticeable in the coast towns, where there is a very mixed population.

Along the coast, too, one meets the Mina, a people taller and better developed than the Fong, and noted surf men. Their women, in youth, are often distinctly good-looking. One other tribe, found in eastern Dahomey, may be mentioned, the Nagos, or Nagots, of whom the Yoruba of Nigeria form a branch. A more primitive people than the Fong and without their centralised organization, they suffered much from their warlike neighbours.

This account does not deal with the regions added to Dahomey by the French since the overthrow of Behazin; these northern districts have nothing in common with Dahomey proper save that they are under the same government. To-day, under the sympathetic guidance of men who seek to rule by understanding the native mind, the Dahomians are contented, loyal, and prosperous.